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ABSTRACT

Originally begun as a government-sponsored project for scientists, engineers, and military personnel to exchange information with great speed and efficiency, the Internet has become a virtual community, an online culture arisen from the depths of computerized networking and communication. This paper presents positive and negative aspects of the Internet culture, and the issues surrounding it. The Internet has spawned a new culture with ideas, mores, and modes of communication unique to itself, but it is far from perfect. Only time will tell whether or not the Internet will bring us closer together through communication. Online culture mirrors "real" society; the human beings that make up the Internet behave like human beings, but through a new, "virtual" medium. The Internet culture will continue to evolve, mutate, and change as technology and as society does. The paper discusses characteristics that make up a culture; the anarchistic nature of Internet culture; the Internet culture as it benefits classroom instruction and communication; the language, manners, and mores of Internet culture; navigational difficulties; interaction between new and experienced users; treatment of women; Internet addiction; the effect of Internet use on reading and writing skills; accuracy and quality of materials on the Internet; and commercialization of the Internet. (Contains 26 references.) (Author/SWC)

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The Internet Culture: Transitions and Problems

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The Internet (the Net) grew out of Arpanet, a Government sponsored project through which scientists, engineers, and military personnel could exchange information with great speed and efficiency. However, Internet was developed by civilians. The nineteen eighties saw a tremendous rise in people trading and discussing information via computer networks. Computerized bulletin boards like "The WELL" became a *virtual* meeting place where people exchanged information and ideas, and shared emotions. A virtual community, an online culture, arose from the depths of computerized networking and communication. Whether it is sharing a love for science fiction novels or the Grateful Dead, this cyberspace culture is less interested in Internet applications for science, business or the military, and more concerned with communicating and sharing interests. This paper briefly examines the Internet and the culture it has spawned, looking at both the positives and the negatives surrounding it.

As futurist Howard Rheingold points out, the greatest technological innovations come not from the "orthodoxy of the computer industry," but from the fringe and subcultures of society. Computer network enthusiasts, who expanded and helped design the Internet as we know it today, did so not for commercial reasons, but because of their personal desires to venture into the world of "virtual possibilities."[1]

Before looking into the various aspects of Internet culture, it is important to define what characteristics make up a culture. Culture is a "shared organization of ideas that includes intellectual, moral and aesthetic standards ... ."[2] Indeed, the Internet contains all of these characteristics and has its own

unique set of standards and mores, which in many cases mirror those of society outside of cyberspace. However, the Internet is different in that it is not a "single" subculture, but rather it is an "ecosystem of subcultures."[3] Yet, all of its different networks make up a vast array of information, knowledge, and experience. The virtual community is like a "living encyclopedia"; it has become the "world encyclopedia" which H.G. Wells wrote about in the nineteen thirties.[4] Theoretically, anyone with a modem and a telephone connection can get information, pictures, and soundbites from the Internet about nearly any topic from nearly any place in the world. This is a result of the people who participate in virtual culture and believe that information should be freely available.

Although Marshall McLuhan originally wrote about the possible effects of television on our society, the Internet and its culture has become, as he wrote, a "global network that has much the character of our central nervous system."[5] The nodes, which connect the Internet and reroute bits and bytes, can be compared to our brain and nervous system responding to various stimuli. Some have observed an "American Pioneer Spirit" in the Internet, and point out that, within the bowels of cyberspace, a person is not physically present, but one's consciousness, ideas, and essence are there, in an "abstracted" sense, through communication.[6] Online culture is not that much different from face-to-face, human contact; as Rheingold points out, "People in virtual communities use words or screens to exchange pleasantries, argue, *intellectualize* and conduct commerce."[7] The culture of the Internet can bring human beings together in a kind

of global electronic village. Writer, and Electronic Frontier Foundation co-founder, John Perry Barlow, points out that through the use of the Net's e-mail capabilities he feels "more connected to the entire species."[8]

One could view the Internet and its culture as a place which is anarchistic in form and content, but which governs itself in a manner such that no police force is needed. Perhaps the best examples of the anarchistic nature of the Internet culture are the various newsgroups of USENET, where there is no emphasis on any central organization. E-mail versions of interest groups, known as LISTSERVS, also have become commonplace on the Net. Many newsgroups have their own set of frequently-asked questions (FAQ's), which explain the nature of the group and its area of interest. People communicate through their words and ideas. The same is true of Inter Relay Chat (IRC), where words alone construct the content of communication, without the aid of facial expressions, tone of voice or body language. IRC represents the first time a geographically-dispersed group of people can instantaneously use the written word to connect with one another. As a conversational medium, the effects of IRC and USENET do not fit into conventional theories of human communication. Therefore, much study of their impact on society remains to be done. Both IRC and the newsgroups were catalysts which allowed online culture to evolve, mutate, and take on new forms.[9]

The Internet culture also has benefited the classroom. One can find a vast amount of interesting and educational material on the Net's World Wide Web (WWW), but more importantly, the Internet is being used to connect students and their instructors.

There are instructors who conduct entire courses via e-mail and establish special, class USENET groups to discuss problems and questions. Professor Robert Bender found out, when he used the Internet for his interdisciplinary studies class, that it helped create a sense of community in the classroom. The students were more active in the learning process. Students who would not have expressed their ideas in a typical classroom setting really took to the Internet and presented their ideas freely.[10] The full effects of society becoming "plugged in" and the Net's implications for education have yet to be seen. There are many who are optimistic about it, including one of the Internet's creators, Vinton Cerf, who envisions a future with homes "equipped with LANs (Local Area Networks) that link most appliances together," and where "Teachers and parents will be able to confer by e-mail and Johnny won't be able to claim that there is no homework because you'll see it on the Web page for his school and classes."[11] In this way, we can see how online culture has created an intellectual mindset that may possibly revolutionize educational theory and concepts.

Internet culture has also created its own set of new language terms, manners, and mores. New terms are being added constantly with accompanying acronyms (e.g., IRC, FAQ, WWW). One writer pointed out that the virtual culture has created its own "dialect ... full of mysterious abbreviations."[12] Although emotion cannot be displayed physically over the Net, it can be expressed in subtle ways, through the use of emoticons (e.g., ";)" stands for a wink, ":)" stands for a happy face, and ":(" denotes sadness). The use of keyboard characters for emotional

statements has given rise to a whole new syntax in which emotional content can be expressed. The virtual community has also developed its own set of mores, known as *netiquette*, which contains rules and modes of appropriate behavior. Along with netiquette come new terms which indicate inappropriate ways of acting, such as *flaming* (verbal abuse) and *spamming* (sending the same message to people all over the Net). In fact, there are several guides to netiquette which provide Internet users with proper modes of behavior. Most of the netiquette guides include Internet culture terms and emoticon expressions.[13]

Despite all the positive rhetoric about how the Internet has created a wonderful new culture which connects people, thus forming a global village, critics of the Net point out that there is a dark side to it. For example, since the Internet is not organized, it is difficult to navigate, despite such tools as NetScape and search engines like Webcrawer or Yahoo. It can be "frustrating for people accustomed to centralized information services."[14] It is easy to get lost in the maze of online society, even with all the guides available to explain its culture and modes of operation. With new users flooding the Net at a rate of a million per month, critics point out that some experienced Internet users have become cliquish in their treatment of "newbies" (new users to the Net). Tolerance for new users and their mistakes is at an all time low. As one critic put it, "the social structure is beginning to fray."[15] Some Internet users are nasty and aggressive toward anyone who disagrees with them; flame wars erupt, and feelings get hurt, which makes one big, bitter mess of virtual soup. An innocent

question posted to a LISTSERV or newsgroup can be met with a tremendous amount of hostility. Since the Net is sometimes viewed as a torch, holding up the right of free speech, many right- and left-wing radical groups post messages which include racist and hate speech as well advocacy of violence to meet their political and social ends.[16]

Another aspect of the Internet culture's dark side is in its treatment of women. Only thirteen percent of the users on the Net are women, and some have not been treated very well. Many have encountered rude comments and sexual harassment; others have been ignored, which has tended to "squelch female participation." One writer suggests that, if such behavior continues on the Net, it could "turn the clock back 50 years for women."[17] There is plenty of room for improvement in this area. One way to improve is for women to make their presence known and be assertive in their Net activities.

Like the real world, virtual culture has created its own addicts: those who spend many hours on the Internet engaging in IRC, browsing, or using e-mail. Some people have begun to model their entire lives and identities through their computer modems and screens. This has become a serious enough problem that a 12-step newsgroup has been created to deal with IRC addiction and recovery.[18]

Net culture advocates point to how the Net has created a wonderful world of communication and how it contributes to the making of a literate society. They claim that, now more than ever, those who use the Internet need to be literate and have good writing and reading skills: "masters of the Net will be

those who can write, listen and speak."[19] Despite this call for a literate online culture, some argue that Internet and its culture foster a society which has no need for literate writing skills. Certainly, it is tempting to use the "reply" command to e-mail messages, without proofreading the message. One only needs to read some of the newsgroups to see that much of the writing is poorly-constructed and full of spelling and grammar errors. One does not tend to put much thought into material that can be published instantaneously. Use of the emoticons in the online culture is something which David Brittan argues leads to poorer communication skills. Since the emoticons are "rubber-stamp 'emotions'... , [they can] risk turning the online world into a poorer less human place than it can be..." He goes on to say that putting a "smiley in a serious email message has the elegance of a bobbing hula doll in the back of a Rolls-Royce."[20]

Critics of the Net culture are quick to point out that it has created nothing more than a "high tech candy dispenser for the eyes." They think of the Internet as a "place of fascinating images, places and information, but with little real contact with other people." With all the images, soundbites, and activities, and with everyone getting on the bandwagon to become plugged in, some critics see society becoming ever more fragmented.[21] Like what is broadcast on television, what is published on the Internet is not necessarily accurate or good. One needs to be discerning and critical while wading through the Net.

The Internet culture began as a way to exchange information and ideas, freely, and there has been tremendous resistance from

the online community to using the Net commercially. However, commercialization was inevitable, and now marketing researchers regularly peruse the Net for new ways to present their products. Many corporations have their own WWW home page, where consumers can view their products and services online. Commercial distributors hope they can reach hundreds of thousands of consumers through the Internet, and some market researchers suggest that, by examining USENET newsgroups, one can find clues about a person's lifestyle and interests and an email address to send advertisements to.[22] In spite of the commercialization of the Internet, a culture continues to be fostered arount it; commercialization does not seem to have affected the Internet too adversely. However, there is a fear that commercialization will produce a higher price tag for access to the Net. There are many Internet providers who do charge, however the predications of the "information haves and have nots" may be premature. John Perry Barlow is positive about the future of the Net and its culture and says that, "communities have a way of maintaining themselves in their early forms ... if a community starts out as a free place, chances are it will go on being a free place."[23] Perhaps local Freenets will be the carriers of this torch.

This paper has presented some of the various aspects, positive and negative, of the Internet culture and the issues surrounding it. Is the Internet a good thing: a bad thing? Like most things in life, perhaps the truth lies somewhere in the middle. The Internet has indeed spawned a new culture with ideas, mores, and modes of communication unique to itself, but it is far from perfect, as critics point out. Yes, a global network

of sorts has been created, but only time will tell whether or not the Internet will bring us closer together through communication. In a very real sense, the online culture mirrors our "real" society and, despite new terms and netiquette mores, human behavior does not change. The human beings that make up the Internet culture behave like humans usually do; they fall in love, participate in role playing games (For example, Multi-User Dungeons [MUDS]), argue and bicker, give and receive advice, and do many other everyday things, but they do all of these things through a new, "virtual" medium. The Internet culture will continue to evolve, mutate, and change as technology does, and as society does as it continues to move forward toward the new millennium.

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